



Happiness Advocacy,
Or, How Positive
Psychology Will Save
Us From Zombies
Annie Passanisi

“What we achieve inwardly will change
outer reality.” – *Plutarch*

“Death and Famine and War and Pollution
continued biking towards Tadfield, and
Grievous Bodily Harm, Cruelty to Animals,
Things Not Working Properly Even After
You’ve Given Them a Good Thumping,
But Secretly No Alcohol Lager, and Really
Cool People traveled with them.” – *Neil Gaiman
and Terry Pratchett’s Good Omens*

“If you’re happy and you know it, clap
your hands.” – *Kids*

Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your Braaaaaaains...

“It’s the end of the world as we know it” and the members of REM may “feel fine” but most of us don’t. Most of us are running scared—like Chicken Little “The sky is falling!” scared. And who can blame us? If I had a nickel for every time a newscaster said “Armageddon” or “Apocalypse” or “Doomsday” lately, I could buy my own station and tell them to knock it off. If I had a penny for each time words like “terrorism,” “recession,” “crisis,” “epidemic,” “scandal,” “war,” or “downfall” were uttered on air, I’d be richer than Beyoncé.

Our emotional apocalypse is nigh! Fear-mongering zombies have taken control of society.

This is a test of your Emergency Anxiety System.
Please stand by. BEEEEEEEEEP.

Newsflash: We are living in a Culture of Fear. During the “Chilean mine crisis” of 2010, a CNN anchor asked Larry King when the last time a similarly triumphant story aired on TV. Their conclusion? Apollo 13. (This just in: Our sources have confirmed Apollo 13 took place in 1970. 40 years with no hope on the news?) Breaking News: Our emotional apocalypse is nigh! Fear-mongering zombies have taken control of society. No end in sight or hope on TV. Extra, extra, read all about it! Forces are rising against The Great Fear. If YOU are ready to change things, stay tuned for details...

What if?

According to some smart scientist somewhere, uncertainty is a leading cause of stress.¹ So let's make a decision. Let's for a few moments decide to agree with the newscasters, the naysayers, the Debbie Downers.

Yes. The world is ending. The Apocalypse looms. In 2012, H1N1-carrying zombies will surf in on the melted polar ice caps and wage war with lead paint covered robots that shoot nukes. Humanity is toast.

Okay. The icky part is over. This is the part where I remind you of some good news: every horror movie has its heroes. After the last zombie has fallen, there is always someone left to repopulate the earth and tell the tale.

What if the world ends tomorrow? You can be sure I'll be one of those leftover people. And I'd like some company (I can't eat all those Twinkies by myself).

What you'll need, or rather, what you won't.

Please feel free to leave the following items at home: Your chainsaw, tin-foil hat, anti-robot laser beam, Martian to English translation dictionary, any form of weaponry, and your "fight or flight" response. I assure you that you won't need them. In order to survive, you'll just need Happiness.

¹ For you detail-oriented nitpickers out there, the nameless smart scientist works for the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health and the article is [Stress Management for the Health of It](#).

Whoa, whoa, whoa. Happiness?

Yes. Happiness. That feeling you get from StuffOnMyCat.com or Skyping with a far away friend. Side effects include: joy, contentment, glee, elation, and surges of confidence, hope, and gratitude. That happiness. If you're ready to throw in the towel (or this in the garbage), kindly allow me to clarify something. This ain't yo' mamma's (or for that matter my mamma's) self-help book. (For the record, my mom's books are fantastic.) If MacGyver can stop a bomb with a toothpick, we can save the world with happiness. "Fiction!" you say? It's even been scientifically proven. You see, it's all in the technique, my friends.

People define happiness differently and derive it from different things. According to Charlie Brown it's a "warm puppy." According to the Beatles it's a "warm gun." You can warm whatever you like, but **here's what happiness isn't:**

Selfish: When did feeling good start feeling so bad? Happiness is not a teeter-totter—just because you're up doesn't mean somebody else has to be down. The science shows us the opposite is actually true—positive emotions spread like viruses in social groups. So the next time you ask yourself, "Who am I to be so happy amid all this sadness?" remind yourself you're the one who will turn it all around (and congratulate yourself for your excellent use of "amid").

A Constant State: In the immortal words of REM, "Everybody hurts sometimes." According to Professor Tal Ben-Shahar of Harvard, if you don't experience negative emotions you're "either a sociopath or dead." Or a member of the undead? If this applies to you, please stop reading now and leave the rest of us to plot your demise in peace.

Unrealistic: No worries, you'll take no oaths of "cock-eyed optimism" or "Pollyanna thinking." Happiness doesn't require delusion. It's important to know that life isn't all "sunshine, lollipops, and rainbows" and to react accordingly. Auto-piloting a happy face helps no one. This isn't about "grin and bear it," it's about "grin and deal with it." Deal?

Commercial: Sorry, Coca-Cola. I may be buying what you're selling, but I'm not picking up what you're puttin' down with your whole "Open Happiness" campaign. The Beatles told us money couldn't buy us love and it can't buy us joy either—not even in the crisp refreshing form of Diet Coke. Same goes for you, Hallmark.

Fluffy: The Science of Happiness is just that—science. There were experiments involved, and lab coats, and fancy-schmancy technologies. Nerds rejoice!

Counterculture: The Science of Happiness applies to all people regardless of age, gender, political views, geography, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, or favorite food. It transcends culture, so cannot be called "counterculture." There is nothing unpatriotic about happiness, nor does it require large amounts of LSD. Sure, people may call me a "hippie," but I'd rather be a hippie than a zombie any day.

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Choose your own adventure.

“But hooooow? How can I be happy?”, you may whine. Well, my dears, that’s up to you. I’m not Dr. Phil, your momma, or your shrink. And in my experience as a 20-something wellness expert, I’ve discovered that people in Generations X, Y, and Z don’t like to be told what to do anyway. I propose, instead, a radical new self-help idea—helping yourself.^{2*} Happiness is like a Choose Your Own Adventure novel. Remember those? “If you want to fight the zombie, turn to page 92. If you want to run away screaming, turn to page 3.” The bad news is, you have to choose to be happy. The good news is, you get to choose to be happy.

There is no road map to Happiness Land. Repeating a specific phrase a certain number of times, buying a shiny new product, or following an intricate set of instructions to the letter may get you closer but the choices are ultimately yours. And it really is a choice. According to Sonja Lyubomirsky, Ph.D., Professor of Psychology at the University of California, Riverside (and possessor of an awesome last name), 50% of your happiness is based on genetics (thanks, Mom and Dad), 40% on intentional activities (or choices!) and 10% on circumstances. For those of you who are just skimming this page, I repeat—**only 10% is based on circumstance.** That horrible boss, or unfulfilling day job, psycho mother-in-law, bad perm, titanic over-draft fee—all those things the fear zombies thrive on—are responsible for only 10% of your happiness. 10%. That’s not even a decent sale discount.

So here’s your scenario... “You turn a dark corner, shivering in your Chucks. There, before you, is the dreaded fear zombie. It lurches toward you, the brains of some other poor fool still stuck in its teeth. You’re suddenly reminded of your student loans and the state of the ozone layer. To succumb to the fear zombie, don’t do a damn thing. Stay where you are. Challenge nothing. Throw this in the trash. To rise up and fight the fear, turn to page 8.”

² If you DO need some helpful tips on scientifically proven ways to increase happiness, I'd be happy to suggest some brilliant Positive Psychology books for you. Just email me at HappinessAdvocates@gmail.com.

Knocking the Four Horsemen off their high horses.

Remember our worst-case scenario? That's right—the End of Days. How and why the world will cease to be has been a widely debated topic since the Beginning of Days. The first recorded prophecy of Earth's final moments, (the Zoroastrianism eschatology, circa 500 B.C.) predicted the sun would become more spotted and shine less as men became less grateful. Islamic texts suggest the sun will rise in the West instead of the East. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints warns that the sun, moon, and stars won't shine at all. Well, which is it? We can't even all agree about what the sun will be up to. Facing a faceless foe is especially stressful (due to that whole “uncertainty thing”), so for the sake of preparation let's plan on the most common tale. The world will end with the rise of the four horsemen: **War, Famine, Pestilence, and Death**. Lucky for us, science has shown us we can knock those creepy equestrians off their horses one by one.

It's time to fight fire with flowers. It's time to kill zombies with kindness.

Pestilence, Pessimism, and Other Plagues: According to Wikipedia, “pestilence” is a death metal band from the Netherlands founded in 1986, a World of Warcraft cheat, and “any epidemic disease that is highly contagious, infectious, virulent and devastating.” Since I know nothing about death metal or WoW, let's focus on that last one. And, as I'm not a doctor, let's skip over medical plagues like H1N1 and Malaria and AIDS (hey, I'm making the rules here) and focus on a psychological one—our old pal fear from page 2.

Fear, Terror, Dread. According to Dan Baker, Ph.D., author of *What Happy People Know*, all fear is divided into “fear of not having enough” and “fear of not being enough.” Cognitive Behavioral therapists will tell you that one thought reproduces similar thoughts. Get a chain of fears going and before you know it, you have a raging outbreak in your head. And what does Princeton's WordNet Dictionary call “the feeling that things will turn out badly?” Pessimism.

Pessimism is fear allowed to run rampant. The antivirus is obvious: *good old optimism*.

As previously mentioned, we're not talking about the "cock-eyed" variety, but the simple belief that things are going to be okay. It's that famous "glass half-full" or "glass half-empty" mentality.^{3*}

Is the world ruined beyond repair? Did the Black Plague wipe out humanity No more than your stomach explodes when you drink soda and eat Pop Rocks. How do we know? Because we're still here—we persisted and lived to tell the tale.

In the modern blogosphere, Seth Godin devotees will tell you all about the "lizard brain." They'll tell you how the most primitive part of the brain, near the brain stem, created the mental, physical, and emotional response known as "fear" to keep our ancestors alive, by triggering the "fight or flight" response. Godinites will tell you to shut the lizard brain up and replace the fear with constructive action.

Slay "the fear of not having enough" by being grateful for what you have, proactive about what you want, and hopeful for what you will have in the future. Defeat the "fear of not being enough" by becoming an undeniable champion of love, peace, compassion, and kindness.

War: *"Again and again, we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force."* —Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Rather than tap dance on raw nerves, I am not going to say anything about politics. Surviving the Zombie Apocalypse with a flourish is something lefties, righties, and undecideds are all capable of. Instead I'll stick to the war at home—crime. Way back in 1924, in her landmark study of true crime titled "Murder and Its Motives," F. Tennyson Jesse named six main motives for crime: gain, revenge, elimination, jealousy, conviction, and blood lust. I think the effect of "soul force" on these nasty desires is pretty obvious but I'll spell it out anyway.

³ My friend, Matt Gottlieb, would tell you the air in the glass would make it all full. I think he stole that from a tee-shirt he saw.

Gain? Happy people are happier with what they have, even after extreme loss (Google “mental states of amputees over time”). Revenge? Happiness aids forgiveness and vice versa. Elimination? As I’ll discuss later, happy people impact the happiness of those around them, which makes them less annoying, which makes you less likely to want to eliminate them. Jealousy? Happiness and gratitude are closely related. The more you love what you have, the less “coveting thy neighbor’s stuff” you’ll do. Conviction? Happy people like their lives. They see the good in the world and other people. They are freaking happy. I’d say the likelihood of lovey-dovey feelings and the intense desire to aid humanity causing violent crime is slim to none. And finally, blood lust? Gross. Save that for the zombies.

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But has this touchy-feely do-goodyness actually been tested on the mean streets? Yes. It has. Matthew Lee, professor of sociology at LSU, found that “vibrant civic climates” rife with volunteerism, community involvement, and entrepreneurial attitude are less likely to experience high crime rates. “When people are disconnected or disenfranchised, the potential for violence escalates.” Additionally, over 20 studies have shown the relationship between broken homes and criminal behavior. And to what does John Gottman, world-renowned expert on marital stability and divorce prediction, attribute the breakdown of many marriages? Frequent expressions of antagonism. (Please see above, re: motives of crime. Yuck.) Clearly, the quest for peace begins at home.

According to David Orme-Johnson, PhD, expert in the field of Transcendental Meditation, “Violence in society is caused by the buildup of stress in collective consciousness.” So chill out, pal.

The amazing Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar tells his Positive Psychology students (at places like, oh, you know, HARVARD) that “what you appreciate appreciates.” Turn your attention to the happier parts of life. Deal with your stress constructively. Quiet your brain for a while. The collective consciousness thanks you.

Famine: As I write this, unemployment is a major concern in the US. The word “recession” flies around like an ever-present ping-pong ball of destruction. The bread lines of the 1930s have been replaced by drive-thru lines anxiously awaiting the 99-cent value menu. This, mis amigos, is famine.

Since it’s been proven time and time again that money can’t buy happiness (there are peasants in other parts of the world who make Kelly Ripa look like Eeyore, and Lotto winners go back to their base level of happiness no matter what), let’s focus on that un- (or under) employment issue. Let’s think simplistically here. It seems a lot of good could be done if people could A) get a job, B) do a good job, and C) get a better job. For that, we turn to our old pal, Happiness.

1. Get a job. For expert advice on getting a JOB in the USA, I turned to USAJOBS. And what do you think they said is “the key to winning in an interview?” A positive attitude. Although experience and credentials are still important, many customer service-oriented companies are following a strict “Hire for Attitude, Train for Skill” policy. According to Samuel Greengard of Workforce Management, Southwest Airlines is a prime example. They seek out “the perfect blend of energy, humor, team spirit and self-confidence” by watching how potential employees interact with each other. They rule people out based on attitude alone, even before the first round of interviews.

2. Do a good job. According to self-proclaimed Chief Happiness Officer Alexander Kjerulf’s brilliant article “Top Ten Reasons Why Happiness is the Ultimate Productivity Booster,” happy people work better with others, handle problems better and with less complaining, have more energy and vitality, learn faster, are more motivated, and make better decisions. BOOYAH! Nuff said (Thanks, Alexander.)

3. Get a better job. Feel like climbing the corporate ladder or striking out on your own rebel path? Both take creativity and guts. According to the research of Teresa Amabile, “There seems to be a cognitive process that gets set up when people are feeling good that leads to more flexible, fluent, and original thinking, and there’s actually a carryover, an incubation effect, to the next day.” Did you get that? One day of happiness spawns two days of creativity. I’m not an economist, but that sounds like a damn good deal to me.

For the in-between-jobs times, heed the words of Carol Graham (the person who studied happy peasants), “The bottom line is that people can adapt to tremendous adversity and retain their natural cheerfulness, while they can also have virtually everything—including good health—and be miserable.”

Death: I saw this play once where Death was personified as a good-looking guy in suspenders who breathed heavily (in a good way) and told stories about the Sun. In that instance, Death was so hot. But, since most of us see Death as more of the Harry Potter Dementor/meets the Grim Reaper/meets your 3rd grade substitute math teacher variety, let’s have Happiness take a crack at it, too.

I’m sorry, but Happiness will not make you immortal. Will you settle for living a longer, healthier life? Okay. Good.

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The antivirus is obvious: good old optimism.

People's Exhibit A: Deborah Danner, David Snowden, and Wallace Friesen of the University of Kentucky read the autobiographical essays of 180 nuns born before 1917 (which sounds like a huge snooze-fest to me.) They scored these essays based on how many sentences contained positive words and how many contained negative words. In the 1990s, after about 40% of the nuns had died, they found that the happier nuns lived an average of 10 years longer than the Negative Sister Nancies.

People's Exhibit B: "Benefit Finding," which is one part "whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger: and one part "always look for the silver lining," has been shown to have a phenomenal effect on AIDS patients. The Bower study of 1998 reported that benefit finding caused a lower mortality rate in AIDS survivors mourning a loss. The Milam study of 2004 found that positive change increased immune function overall.

People's Exhibit C: Some crazy researchers named Redelmeier and Singh found that Academy Award winners live an average of four years longer than nominees, and repeat winners live slightly longer than one-time winners. (Jack Nicholson and Meryl Streep are going to outlive us all. Get over it.) What does that mean for you and me? According to Christopher Peterson's *Primer in Positive Psychology*, "The psychological experience of success and victory may add years to someone's life."

Closing Argument: Happy people are less likely to turn to addictions for stress-relief and escape. That cuts down on smoking, drinking, and drug-related deaths BIG TIME. And with that, the Happiness Defense rests, your Honors.

Wait a minute. I was promised zombies!

Distilled from the finest ancient texts on zombie survival, hand-crafted after years of late-night viewings of Night of the Living Dead (the original, of course), I present to you the Happiness Advocates 3 Step Process For Not Getting Your Brain Eaten.

1. Be prepared. The other experts will tell you to have a survival pack (bandages, flash lights, power tools) at the ready. Well sure, but emotional preparedness is equally important. I've previously discussed how happiness makes you more creative, productive, and optimistic. Hell, it will even help you run faster. Happiness guarantees you bring your A-Game to the fight.

2. Keep moving. The other experts will tell you to find a high powered automobile, stock up on gas, and get out of Dodge. Rock on, but not getting stuck in an emotional rut is equally important. Will a zombie hesitate to attend your pity party? No. It will eat you. The science shows us that happy people bounce back from trauma faster. The happier you are during the initial outbreak of zombie plague, the easier it will be for you to face your nasty negative emotions, deal with them, and move on.

3. Don't go it alone. The other experts will tell you you're more likely to survive in a small group than on your own, and I entirely agree. According to a recent Japanese study of 12,000 people, spending time with like-minded people can boost your immune system and lower your risk of cardiovascular and circulatory diseases. Other happy people help you live longer. They will guard your fort while you take a nap and hold your hand when you're scared. Plus, you'll need them for repopulation purposes when all is said and done.

If all else fails, find an island. Zombies lack the muscle control to swim and the gases in their decaying bodies will cause them to float. Bring supplies for a rockin' beach party and you've got it made in the shade.

And in case you're sore at me for the amazing simplicity of my zombie survival plan: Happiness will save you from **Pirates**. Pirates are driven by greed. Happy people are generous. Give them what they want and they are less likely to beat your booty. (Get it?) Happiness will save you from **Samurai**. Samurai are obsessed with honor. Tell them all about the your kickass do-gooding and you'll decrease the odds of them carving you up by at least 37%. Happiness will save you from **Robots**. Robots don't have hearts. Think with yours and they'll fry their mother-boards trying to figure you out. And if all else fails, play showtunes. According to Disney Pixar's *WALL-E*, robots just love their movie musicals.

But, alas, I'm only one zombie slayer!

Not so, my brave bold friend. You're **contagious**.

83.4% of zombie flicks start with some kind of epidemic.⁴ The dreaded virus comes, and BAM!—the walking dead take over. Oh, and that vaccine that should save humanity? Well it's either in some top-secret lab you can't get to, or it's what's turning your pals into mind-munching corpse-people.

You are now "Patient Zero" for a brand new kind of outbreak: the Ease Epidemic.⁵ Every time you act you infect someone near you. It's its not science-fiction fantasy, and it's certainly not touchy-feely hocus-pocus.

This virus is 100% legit. Harvard said so.

Behold the Framingham Heart Study—here in a dainty abridged format (Google it for all the juicy details). This study by Harvard Medical School and the University of California, San Diego studied the health and happiness of 5,000 people over a 20 year span. By pinpointing the

⁴ This percentage is entirely bogus. Sorry.

⁵ For more information about the Ease Epidemic and the science of emotional contagion, please visit www.ImContagious.com.

happiest and healthiest people and considering their relationships to each other, they found that one person's happiness can trigger results up to three degrees in close proximity. So my happiness influences my mother's, which influences her best friend's, which influences her neighbor's. So my mom's bestie's neighbor (whom I have never met) is influenced by my good mood! (You're welcome.)

And the truly super-duper awesome news is sadness doesn't have the same spreading power.

Every time you act you infect
someone near you.

Safety in numbers. Or, is there anyone alive out there?

Haven't you always wanted to be that person that everyone turns to when zombies are beating down the door? Late at night when you're plotting your escape plan, haven't you dreamt of leading everyone you love to safety and looking completely kick-ass along the way?

Become a Happiness Advocate. Own your own awesomeness. Defeat fear at every turn. Kill zombies with kindness. This is your chance. Smile. Hug. Celebrate. High-five. Compliment. Share. Play nice. Email me. Tell me how we can support each other, thrive together, and throw one hell of an after-party. Your community will be affected and respond accordingly. Sidekicks will flock to you. Damsels/Dudes in distress will think you're wildly attractive. It's science. They just can't help it.

What if I'm wrong?

"But Annie," you may be thinking, "what if you're wrong about these fear zombies?" Due to the cosmic nature of my subject matter, I fully admit I could be. Nobody bats 1000% when it comes to prophecy. Remember Y2K? What a snore that turned out to be.

So if you're reading this and I've been debunked:

A. The world hasn't ended. The fear zombies didn't attempt hostile takeover. The polar ice caps refroze, and robots turned out just like Rosie on *The Jetsons*. At his Rally to Restore Sanity, my favorite philosopher Jon Stewart said, "These are hard times, not End Times." To that I simply say, "If so, awesome. Rock on."

B. The world is ending and there is nothing we can do about it. Meteors are headed straight for us or a supreme being is tired of watching our earthly reality show. Well, then, at least we tried. And at least we made our last few days a little brighter.

But if I'm right (and I am), in the immortal words of dork icon Frodo the Hobbit, "I'm glad to be here with you Sam, here at the end of all things." If I'm wrong, I call upon the words of REM once more, "It's the end of the world as we know it, and I feel..." content, ready and oh-so-very-fine.

How do you feel? 

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Annie Passanisi, Happiness Advocate and Whimsy Coach, is a second-generation motivator, as well as a Chicago-based actor and writer. The Grand Destroyer of Fear Zombies, Annie is the founder of [Happiness Advocates](#) and [The I'm Contagious Ease Epidemic](#). She is 4'11", bakes a mean cherry pie, loves Nat King Cole, and fully intends to survive the zombie apocalypse and live in a palatial tree house. She would like to remind you that your good mood isn't a right—it's a civic duty.

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